
 DPAL RGYAL: ARTIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Klu thar rgyal ལུ་ཐར་རྒྱལ། (Independent Scholar)

One sweltering summer afternoon in 2016, my family was enjoying yogurt while sitting in order of age around a table at my home. Father suddenly clapped his leg and blurted out "Oh! I remember!" took his cell phone from his coat pocket and said, "Klu kho, please translate these new Chinese messages for me."

"China Mobile is really your best friend! It texts you almost every day!" I joked, taking the phone from his hand.

One message was for my older brother, Dpal rgyal. The prefecture government informed Brother (b. 1980) that he was chosen to represent Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture for the 2016 Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province Disabled Persons vocational skills competition in the photography category. Photography contestants were required to bring their own camera and would take photographs at the competition venue.

Father, as usual, was very supportive, urging Brother to take advantage of this opportunity. "We don't expect Dpal rgyal to win the first prize, but it will be an excellent experience!" he said, and planned to borrow a better camera from one of his friends, because Brother's camera was not new and small. Brother had spent 2,500 RMB to buy it four years earlier.

However, Brother wanted to use his own familiar camera during the match. He communicated through sign language that he was used to it, and that picture-taking skill was more important than the quality of the camera.

Brother Dpal rgyal is deaf and mute. When he was about two years old, he had a bad cold that became steadily worse. Father then decided to take him to the township clinic. At that time, we lived on the remote grassland and our living conditions were very poor. We had no

motorcycle or horse, so Father carried Brother over several mountains in the snow. It took one day to reach the clinic.

The doctor didn't know what was wrong and gave Brother injections of streptomycin, a common treatment at that time in our community because it was very effective. Indeed, Brother quickly recovered, however, he became deaf.

Brother never attended school because there are no schools for deaf children where we live. Father and Grandfather took him to see various doctors and famous *bla ma* and diviners, and donated half of our family's property to our local monastery in the hope Brother would improve.

He remained deaf.

Still, my parents await the day when Brother will hear and speak again as predicted by one famous *bla ma*.

Brother is an excellent photographer and herdsman. He studied drawing by himself and draws beautiful pictures about herding life. He also trained with one of Father's friends and is an excellent carpenter. Brother's many talents have earned him lots of friends.

The contest was to be held on the third of August, but Brother was to arrive on August first with a companion, which is why I went with him. After we bought tickets at our county bus station, a man came over to us and asked if we were attending the competition. I looked at him and asked in surprise, "How did you know?"

He replied, "I'm also participating in the provincial professional skills competition for the disabled. I saw you using your hands to communicate with each other, so I guessed you were also attending. Oh, and my name is Gnam rtse 'bum," he concluded with a smile, revealing two gold teeth.

"Who is your companion?" I asked.

"I have no companion..." but before he could finish, the driver called us to board the bus. I looked at Gnam rtse 'bum again and wondered how he was disabled.

Brother and I sat behind his seat on the bus. Later he turned to me and asked about Brother and what he would do during the competition.

I introduced Brother and then said, "You mentioned that you are disabled, but how?"

"Well, actually, I have no feet," he said in a friendly way.

"How is that possible? You walk normally!" I exclaimed.

"Haha... everybody asks the same question! I have artificial feet," he said, slapping his calves with his hands.

Seeing that he was humorous, I was glad that we had met. I was sure we would not be bored on our four-hour journey!

"Oh! There must have a miraculous story about your feet. Please tell us about it!" I encouraged.

"OK, but you must promise me that you will help me carry my luggage after we get off," he said.

"With pleasure," I agreed.

"Well... I lost my feet when I was twenty-five. One cold winter night as usual, I rode my horse to meet one of my girlfriends. I was drunk, lost consciousness, and fell off my horse when I was returning home. When I woke up the next morning, I realized my feet were frozen. Actually, it was the top of my feet that had frozen. To make a long story short, I was hospitalized in the county hospital, the tops of my feet were cut away, and I was unable to get out of bed for a year. My wife and most of my friends left me."

An old herder sitting in front of Gnam rtse 'bum turning around and exclaimed, "How could she do that! Do you have a wife now?"

"I married two more times. I have two lovely children with my present wife. I've never lacked for women in my life," he answered with a warm smile.

We all laughed and he continued:

My father died years ago. My mother was in her sixties and in poor health, my brother was married and teaching at a middle school, and my sister lived in another village with her husband. Mother was the only one who could care for me until I could walk again. I knew that it was impossible for either her or my siblings to look after me for a long time. Also, the doctors told me I was very healthy. I then began to think about living independently.

My wounds had completely recovered after a year. I then visited some experienced tailors in my community and learned how to make traditional robes. We chatted while we were sewing. Life was much happier than being in bed. Sometimes I forgot I was unable to walk."

Four years later, I was introduced to an organization called ASIA. They gave me prosthetic feet and I eventually learned to walk again. It was a very happy moment when I could again stand. No one had ever thought I would walk again, but I did it! It was just like I had been reborn!

While I was in bed, I had a lot of time to think about my past and about my future. I would surely be in prison now if I had not had that accident. All my best friends are in prison now. I had lots of friends from local communities when I was in my twenties. We had a lot in common and I was always proud of it. We fought those who we didn't like or whose manner offended us. We thought we could do anything and that nothing would control us. All the locals knew us.

Those circumstances and that way of thinking led to my greatest transformation, making me a real, independent man. What happened to me was retribution for my sins. I have a strong belief in karma that only gets stronger with time.

I have worked as a tailor for seven years and, compared to my peers, I have a good income. I have my own car, apartment, and family. I am satisfied with my current life conditions. I am planning to open a workshop with some local disabled people. I want to help them change their life.

His story led me to recall a disabled primary school classmate - Tshe ring. He was a good singer and very good at telling Ge sar stories. I and other classmates often went to his dorm and listened to him tell stories during our lunch break.

He herded yaks as well as his father when he was only eight years old. One day, one of his family's yaks was killed by another yak while they were fighting near a clean stream. The family decided to cut up the yak carcass so it would be easier to take home.

After cooking and eating some of the fresh beef, Tshe ring was unable to stand. His parents took him to the hospital and also

consulted a *bla ma* to learn what rituals they should hold to aid in Tshe ring's recovery. The family subsequently sponsored various rituals as the *bla ma* suggested, but the rituals, hospital visits, and treatments were equally ineffective.

His family believed that they had offended the water deity in the place where they had cut up the yak carcass which, they reasoned, had polluted the clean stream.

Tshe ring believed that he was guilty of many sins in his previous life and was now receiving retribution.

After a pleasant journey, we reached our destination. The prefecture government had arranged everything, including a place for us to sleep and eat. They treated us very well. There were eleven people from our prefecture - nine contestants and two companions.

I saw two blind people wearing dark glasses while we were enjoying our supper that evening. One of the blind men suddenly told the leaders he had to leave after a phone conversation. His uncle was about to have an emergency operation and he needed to visit him. I was curious why his uncle was more important than the competition, and later heard more about him. His name was Rdo rje, he had been born in 1980 in a farming area, his parents died when he was very young, he lost his eyesight when he was about three years old from a disease, and he had been raised by his paternal grandparents and uncle.

He attended a school for the blind when he was eighteen. In 2012, he was employed at the prefecture Tibetan hospital as a masseuse. Many visited him for massages and his life condition was much improved.

The next morning, we headed to the capital of our province, Zi ling (Xining) City. This required three hours by bus. The other blind man, Don 'grub (b. 1990) from a farming area, made the trip very enjoyable. He was a gifted singer of Tibetan traditional songs, especially *la gzhas* 'love songs'. He sang lots of songs and made jokes, which made the time pass quickly.

Our final destination was a school in Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, which was located near Zi ling. This is where the 2016 Qinghai

Province Disabled Persons Vocational Skills Competition was held. Everything had been arranged and contestants were treated very well.

There were nearly seventy participants from the province's six prefectures, as well as cities and schools. The competition included health care massage, computer operation, *thang ka* painting, poster design, tailoring, and photography. There were a few Tibetans and Tu. The rest were Chinese.

Brother made friends with different people through signing.

Our prefecture leader suggested that Brother use their department's camera during the competition after he saw Brother's camera and compared it to the cameras of the other competitors, most of whom seemed to be professional photographers with large, very expensive cameras.

Brother insisted on using his own camera. There were six competitors. Brother was the youngest. Most of the others were in their forties and fifties.

The photography event began at eight-thirty AM on August third. Participants could take whatever photographs they liked, but everyone had to submit ten photographs before ten-thirty AM. I noticed Brother was a little bit shocked by this piece of information, as well as the other contestants' elaborate cameras.

I encouraged him and then left. I waited outside for two hours and then met Brother, who seemed tired and less confident. He signed that there was little to photograph in the area they had been assigned to take pictures, but that he had done his best.

That afternoon we received a phone call informing us that Brother had been awarded Second Place. We jumped in excitement and then went to meet Gnam rtse 'bum. He had not won a prize, however, he was not upset. He said it was his first time to attend such a competition and that this was a very meaningful experience. He was also happy for Brother's achievement.

Several of the people I met during my time with Brother had faced life challenges and defeated what it seemed fate had decreed for them. Their joyful expressions, open sincere way of interacting with

people, and the way they communicated deeply impacted me. Though most did not receive awards, they still valued the experience.

IMAGES

Dpal rgyal at his home, which he built and designed (2016, Lha mo mtsho).



Dpal rgyal painting at his home (2015, Klu thar rgyal).



(Left) The Tenth Panchen Bla ma (1938-1989) (2015, Dpal rgyal). (Right) Tibetan educator, 'Jigs med rgyal mtsho (b. 1965) (2015, Dpal rgyal).



(Left) Tibetan scholar, Shes rab rgya mtsho (1884-1968) (2013, Dpal rgyal). (Right) An old neighbor (2013, Dpal rgyal).



Tibetan Lo sar (New Year) cake made by Dpal rgyal at his home in 2015, the Year of the Sheep (2015, Dpal rgyal).



Home mural painted by Dpal rgyal (2016, Dpal rgyal).



Thang ka painting competition in Huzhu County during the 2016 Qinghai Province Disabled Persons Vocational Skills Competition (August 2016, Dpal rgyal).



Dpal rgyal with his award at the 2016 Qinghai Province Disabled Persons Vocational Skills Competition in Huzhu County (August 2016, Klu thar rgyal).



Dpal rgyal has bought Tibetan clothing for the disabled in his home community since 2013. Below, disabled community members and some of their household members with new clothes provided by Dpal rgyal in Mgo mang (Guomaying) Township, Mang ra (Guinan) County, Mtsho lho Prefecture (2015, Dpal rgyal).



NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'jigs med rgyal mtshan འཇིགས་མེད་རྒྱལ་མཚན།
 bla ma བླ་མ།
 dpal rgyal དཔལ་རྒྱལ།
 dpon ngan དཔོན་ངན།
 ge sar གེ་སར།
 gnam rtse 'bum གནམ་རུ་མཆོ་འབྲུག།
 Guinan 贵南
 Guomaying 过马营
 Huzhu 互助
 Hainan 海南
 klu kho ལུ་ཁོ།
 klu thar rgyal ལུ་ཐར་རྒྱལ།
 la gzhas ལ་གཞས།
 lha mo mtsho ལྷ་མོ་མཚོ།
 lo sar ལོ་སར།
 mang ra མང་ར།
 mgo mang མགོ་མང།
 mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔན།
 Panchen Bla ma, paN chen bla ma པཎ་ཅན་བླ་མ།
 rdo rje རྡོ་རྗེ།
 shes rab rgya mtsho ཤེས་རབ་རྒྱལ་མཚོ།
 thang ka ཐང་ཀ།
 tshe ring ཚེ་རིང།
 Tu 土
 Xining 西宁
 zi ling ཟི་ལིང།